

YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT

by Leon Smith

I was standing by Ansonville Road, waiting to halt traffic for anyone who wanted to cross over to Polkton school. It was just after Easter, and I had not raised my crossing-guard flag one time since September, because the three kids who walk up from downtown always cross over to the school side before they get to me, and Miss Mona, my 7th grade teacher, is the only one who actually crosses the road.

I don't call her "Miss" Mona, because she was once married to Mama's uncle, whose name I'll call "Mover." Aunt Mona must have brought Lester to town because Mover didn't live up to his name.

As I heard the story, Uncle Mover came in from the country one day, walked up in front of the dry goods store, and aimed his backside at the loafer's bench. But as soon as his bottom hit pine wood, Uncle Mover did not breathe a sigh of relief, but instead he leaned over, gritted his teeth, shook his head, and groaned, "Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhh."

When another loafer asked Mover why he didn't move, he said he was just too weary to stand up, even to relieve the pressure on his privates.

In school, Aunt Mona warned us against being lazy, and acting stupid.

"Be sure your sin will find you out," she proclaimed. "Numbers thirty-two and twenty-three."

"I've got eyes in the back of my head," she continued, showing us the bun in her hair as she wrote on the blackboard. "And as soon as I catch you, I will send you off to Mr. Hamilton."

Then she spun around, and smiled. "His paddle has holes in it."

But she didn't talk to me at my patrol post, instead she breezed right by me every day, to cross the road-- until this very morning.

Your Daddy's been talking at the store," she remarked, "... said my Lester is no count, and ought to get off his backside and get a job."

She paused, as she watched me over her grannie-glasses.

I said nothing in my defense, but I wondered how my teacher knew what went on at the store. She never stood around the woodstove to warm herself, nor had she sat on the linoleum-covered table by the hoop cheese, and she never put her sensible shoes on the green box, which read "Keep your feet off the fatback."

So, how did she know what Daddy had said about Cousin Lester. I only had an idea about that, but I knew for sure how Daddy felt about him.

“Lester’s mama sent him to school to be a civil engineer,” Daddy said. “But as far as I know, all he ever engineered was a way to get drunk and lay out of work.” He paused. “After a while Lester just concentrated on getting drunk.”

I never talked to Lester, but sometimes I saw him in his back yard when I left the morning paper on his mama’s porch, but he seemed too busy feeding two or three mangy dogs to talk. And the only time I actually saw Lester up close was the day he played checkers on Mr. Dickson’s porch, with a man I didn’t know. Mr. Dickson was a big short man, who loved checkers, smiled a lot, and filed sawmill saws on his bannister for a living, when he wasn’t playing checkers.

“Hey,” I waved to him, as I opened the stack of crescent-shaped sawmill bits on his porch pillar and took out my quarter and two dimes. Just then I noticed a quick movement at the checker board, and looked around to see Lester jump five Coca-cola caps in one sweep.

“At least old Lester can play checkers,” I thought, as I climbed on my second-hand Schwinn and headed to his mama’s house, where she would step out , shut the door tight behind her, then hand me the money for her paper.

I was still in the middle of this daydream when Miss Mona called my name from the roadside.

“Leon?” she said. “Leon.” “Young man...are you paying attention to me?”

“No ma’am,” I said. “I’m sorry. I let my mind wander off.”

“Well you let it wander back,” she replied, then pointed her finger at me.

“Don’t you tell your daddy a thing I said,” she cautioned, then turned and clopped toward the pavement, waving a car to a halt as she walked across. I noted that she had just flagged more cars in one second than I had all year.

Then I turned to the matter at hand, wondering “Why would she tell me all this, if she didn’t want me to tell Daddy?”

What she said didn’t make any sense. For although Miss Mona was strict, and gruff, she taught you things you could use, like how to hold one end of the rag in each hand and reach over your head to scrub your back. Like telling boys to keep their shirts tucked in, because she didn’t want us to look sloppy, and telling the girls not to wear tight slacks because “they are too revealing of your figure.”

But still, I didn’t think it was right for my teacher to talk to me that way, then expect me not to tell Daddy what she said.

“Blood is thicker than water,” I thought to myself during Aunt Mona’s history lesson, and when Daddy got home I told him every single thing she said.

“Sometimes the truth is hard,” Daddy replied, nodding his head.

At least two years passed before I understood some of what daddy meant. It was in middle of the day on a Saturday morning, when I rode down to collect forty five cents from Miss Mona. I expected her to come to the door, step outside, shut the door quickly behind her, hand me the money, then vanish as quickly as she had come.

But this morning was different, for she left the door open for just a second too long -- long enough for me to see six or eight mongrels standing there, gazing at me... across a couch arm matted with hair and over a piece of dog dung, which lay whitening on the floor.

I felt sorry for her.